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On the Train to Tibet

October 22, 2008 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

As part of our on-going series of reading recommendations and conversations about Tibet and Tibetan history, we are today featuring a short excerpt from occasional China Beat contributor Alex Pasternack about his recent ride on the new train to Tibet. Pasternack [writes regularly for Treehugger](#), where this essay was published [in its entirety](#).

China's – and the world's – reach to the highest plateau on earth grew in summer 2006 with the opening of the [Qinghai-Tibet Railway \(Qingzang Tielu 青藏铁路\)](#). An engineering marvel that China itself once ruled impossible, the \$4.2 billion line traverses an region known for earthquakes, low temperatures and low atmospheric pressure.

Nearly 1,000 kilometers of rail runs at 4,000 meters or higher, and 550 km of track sits upon permafrost, a feat that required a system that keeps the ground frozen year-round to prevent the rails from sliding. Engineers also had to anticipate the long-term effects of global warming, which are melting Tibet's glaciers at an alarming rate. Former Chinese premier Zhu Rongji called the railway “an unprecedented project in the history of mankind,” a typical unvarnished government boast that for once, wasn't hyperbole.

But no statistic can rival the humbling marvel of the scenery: the second half of the 47-hour journey is a panoramic moving postcard on two sides, looking like the world's longest high definition nature film. A throwback to the glorious days of train travel, the route crosses tundra lined by majestic peaks, fading grasslands where yak and rare antelope graze, mirror-like lakes reflecting an azure and white sky, and the homes of herders bejeweled in rainbows of dancing prayer flags...

Grazing the landscape

Protecting wildlife

At night, entertainment came by book (I tried to get a copy of [The Snow Leopard](#), but *Midnight's Children* would do) and laptop (there's a standard [Chinese outlet](#) in each soft sleeper cabin and along the hallways of each car). One night we watched [Kekexili](#), a hypnotic 2004 film by Lu Chuan that tells

the true story of a ragtag militia that protected the endangered Tibetan antelope from vicious poachers.

Conservationists have warned that the train would pose an even greater threat to this and other treasured species. The film's title refers to the region in the historically Tibetan province of Qinghai where the antelope give birth—and where the railroad threatens to keep them from going.

But as voices in Chinese and English (but not Tibetan) frequently reassured us over the public address system, authorities have gone to [great lengths to mitigate the train's impact on the fragile environment](#), at a cost of around \$192 million.

Wildlife researchers helped engineers install over 30 passageways that would allow the migrating antelope and other animals to pass beneath the train (see one on [Google Earth](#)). Despite an uneasy start and a [scandal over a faked 2006 photograph](#) (see below) that purports to show antelope and train in harmony, some Chinese researchers say that the animals have actually [adapted to their new steel neighbor](#). In a letter to the journal *Nature* detailing their findings, the Beijing-based researchers with the government-sponsored Academy of Sciences say that 98% of the antelopes have managed to migrate in spite of the train.

Photoshop to the rescue

Other successful precautions include the introduction of dozens of man-made swamps to replace swampland and endemic plants destroyed by the train, and the storage of waste onboard until the train reaches collection points, rather than leaving waste on the tracks. A [US Embassy report](#) tells of workers halting work to accommodate migrating antelope.

But embassy officials recorded no instances of rolling up and preserving grass, as authorities promised. Meanwhile, nomads and herders who live near the tracks have complained that they received minimal compensation for their ruined farmland...

For more, including Pasternack's discussion of the effects of resource extraction and migration on the Tibetan people, see [the full essay](#) at Treehugger.

Photos by Alice Liu and Alex Pasternack. See also Erica Gies' [excellent travelogue at Grist](#) and Pankaj Mishra's account at [The New Yorker](#)

Tags: [2008 Tibet](#)

